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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: OCTOBER 2012

CORIOLANUS

It's been a hard week when you go from this…

… to this.

Guess what's new on Netflix?

I've always had a crush on Ralph Fiennes, so it took me a while to get over him looking all burly in his uniform. Once I composed myself, I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Coriolanus is about a Roman general and aristocrat, Caius Martius Coriolanus, who struggles with the lies inherent to a democratic system. 'Rome' in this movie is a multicultural dystopia wracked by poverty; it's a place where demagogues with strange accents rile up mobs and secretly collaborate with irresponsible elites.

Coriolanus is a member of the Roman elite, but he has integrity. He is a ferocious soldier and an effective general. Back home, however, he runs into difficulty because he can't bring himself to pander to the violent (and stupid) mob.

Coriolanus' political enemies use the general's contempt for the crowd as a tool to get Coriolanus exiled. Coriolanus wants revenge, so he bands up with his former rival, Aufidius, to sack Rome.

Aufidius is a general like Coriolanus, but Aufidius's people, the Volsci, honor him as a national hero and Aufidius can walk Volscian streets safely. The Volsci have a more traditional society and are victims of Roman aggression. Aufidius is played by Gerard Butler wearing a cross; his men and people are played (exclusively) by Serbs.

Coriolanus leads the Serbs, er, Volsci, to Rome's gates, but just before victory Coriolanus is swayed from despoiling the City by entreaties from his mother and wife. Coriolanus betrays his partner Aufidius; Aufidius and his men frag Coriolanus. The audience never finds out what happens to Rome.

Recap: Fiennes has directed, produced and starred in a movie where he leads the Serbs against NATO; and NATO looses. *Did you mean to do that, Ralph?*

So the tally is two: Angelina Jolie and Ralph Fiennes. Two entertainment big-wigs who decided to touch the Former-Yugoslavia tar-baby.

I like Fiennes, I think he's brilliant- I even liked *Onegin*. But I never pegged Ralph Fiennes as a guy who'd push the envelop with something like *Coriolanus*. So I had to do a little digging and find out if Ralph really did intend to make this movie.

A clue that he *did* intend to make this movie: *Coriolanus* has a blog devoted to sanitizing its message. (The blog is written by Andreas Wiseman, reportedly on behalf of Ralph. The entry I've linked to is

and makes a point of not saying anything concrete; so you'll get the gist if you just read the last paragraph.)

A clue that Fiennes *did not* intend to make this movie: The same blog features an interview with two Serbs who acted in the film. Ashraf Barhom plays Cassius, one of the demagogues with funny accents:

> ***AW**: Who is Cassius? What is his motivation?*
>
> ***Ashraf Barhom**: For me, Cassius was very interesting, When I read the part for the first time I felt that Cassius was a manipulator. That was my first intuition. He is somebody who uses the situation to achieve his own goals. But after I had thought about it more and more and after talking to Ralph and coming to set and rehearsing I started to find that Cassius is actually someone else. I became connected to the idea that Cassius is an idealist; a person who cares a lot for the people, who cares a lot for Rome as a state. He wants Rome to be managed well and for people to have good lives. He is against corruption.*
>
> *This puts my character in a very difficult situation. On the one hand I am fighting against Coriolanus, but I am also working with the manipulative characters Brutus and Sicinius. So, it's not obvious where I stand. The tribunes Brutus and Sicinius aren't better than Coriolanus in the end. They are even more dangerous.*
>
> *So, my character is a little confused. He needs a lot of energy and effort to find what is morally right. Cassius is initially full of energy, full of belief. But he ends up like a dead person, his spirit is finished. When Coriolanus dies he is devastated that the state is not in a better situation.*

That's right, little Serbian. The man shouting behind the crowd isn't an opportunist collaborating with the Americans, er Roman Elite. He's an *idealist*. He just wants to make the world a better place, and really, you should vote for him when the tanks roll out.

The Fiennes that Barhom describes is the Fiennes who I expected.

Another clue against Ralph intending to make this film: There are parts of Shakespeare's play that Fiennes decided to cut, such as this speech from a crowd-member, which explains their frustration with Rome's elite:

> *Care for us? True indeed! They ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich; and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us.* Act 1, Scene 1 lines 77-84.

It's interesting that Ralph would ixnay that speech, seeing as it has contemporary relevance and would bring in some sympathy for the crowd, which the director struggles to do.

Final clue that Fiennes intended to make this movie: this film didn't get much play in America. Instead, Fiennes first put it to the crowd in Belgrade and Berlin, which, I dare say, are more apt to see things the way I see them. *Coriolanus* didn't hit UKUSA until nine months later, and with limited releases. (It seems to have made a dollar for every ten Fiennes spent, by the way.)

So which message was Fiennes trying to send? The American Kool-Aid gone horribly wrong, or the more cynical Old-World view cleverly hedged?

Frankly, I'm stumped. This film said some really interesting things, but I'm not sure that it meant to. I'm left wondering which actor-tuned-director will step into the ex-Yugo quagmire next…

P.S. *Coriolanus* is dedicated to Simon Channing Williams, who produced Mike Leigh's films. Leigh's early films are great; I know that a few of them were available on Netflix a couple years ago, at least.

LEAVE A COMMENT

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH

Taste the Rainbow.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was an exceptional person; he loved his people irrespective of the consequences to himself. Sometimes his views were popular; sometimes they weren't. What counts is that he lived according to his conscience and was never a shill for anybody.

I started *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* expecting to find a book written to 'prove' the nastiness of Stalin's regime. Clearly, the foreword and afterword material in my edition want readers to see just that.

The book isn't about Stalin in particular. It's a continuation of the debate that has fascinated Russians for a long time: What does it mean to be Russian? The book is a study of the Russian character, tested to its limit. Sometimes Solzhenitsyn's characters are inspiring, sometimes they left me wondering how anybody could be that small. But, I'm sure that these ethical considerations have been hashed out *ad nauseam* elsewhere, so I'll get to the only point I have that may be original.

The Gulag system was set up along the same principles as Tamerlane's armies.

In case you are unfamiliar, Tamerlane was an exceptional general from what is now Uzbekistan. He conquered most of Asia because he was able to create reliable soldiers out of the different peoples who he defeated.

Tamerlane organized his army the same way that that Stalin's Central Camp Administration organized prisoner (zek) squads, squad-leaders, escorts and supervisors.

Tamerlane put just one or two men of any ethnicity into the smallest unit of organization. Without cultural or blood ties, no one trusted each other. If one soldier misbehaved, the whole unit was punished, so the unit effectively policed itself. This principle was repeated up to the largest organizational group, 10,000 men, which was under the supervision of one of Tamerlane's tribesmen, who he could trust unconditionally. (Or that was the plan.)

Tamerlane's system was based on each man's (well-founded) fear of each other. This fear motivated a fighting force which was terrifying in turn: in Russian, each 10,000-man group of Tamerlane's soldiers is termed "one darkness of men". Fifty-thousand soldiers would be "five darknesses".

Imagine such a darkness descending on your village. Tamerlane's campaigns killed something like 17 million people, and that was back in the 1400s, when the world's population was about 350 million. Busy guy.

Ivan Denisovich is not a soldier, he is one man in a prisoner-squad, surrounded by Letts, Estonians, Ukrainians, Tartars and even a Greek/Jew /Gypsy. There's a smattering of different social classes too: well-to-do filmmaker, naval captain, disgraced apparatchik, farmer, artist… all thrown into one big, diverse, cosmopolitan group. Solzhenitsyn writes of Ivan Denisovich:

> *He'd hidden his trowel in a nearby crack in the wall. Although he was among his own men, one of them might swap it for his own. That applied to Kilgas [Ivan's closest 'friend'] too.*

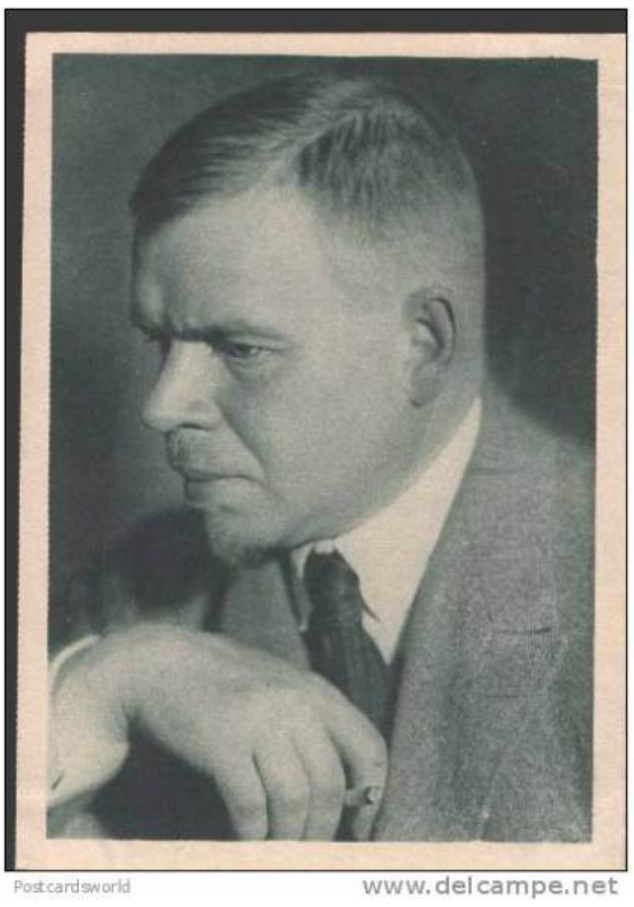
Fear of each other is what motivates the prisoners, and their guards, to keep working. If this fear is weakened, for instance, when an individual is in trouble with authorities, then the other prisoners turn on the compromised one like sharks.

But the darkness isn't the only force in Solzhenitsyn's book. Ivan Denisovich's squad, the 104th, is lead by a noble man, a Kulak's son, named Andrei Tuirin. Tuirin puts his men before himself, and therefore, his men are loyal to him. The relationship between the 104th zeks and their squad-leader is the only inspiring relationship in the book; except perhaps when Ivan Denisovich takes pity on the street-stupid Tzesar at the very end.

I think that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* isn't about the evils of Stalin or Communism, it's about men being noble in a system designed to crush nobility.

2 COMMENTS

PANTELEYMON ROMANOV



P. Romanov, courtesy of delcampe.net

Flash fiction is not an invention of the Internet Era. It was alive and well in Soviet Russia, and like today, it's target audience was people with a few spare moments to read in the morning on the way to work, etc.

Panteleymon Romanov was a master satirist using the 'flash fiction' form. He enjoyed writing about the confusion surrounding Bolshevik policies in the 1920s; his stories are snippets of overheard-conversations between apparatchiks and peasants, for example:

> *Trofim the plasterer came to the meeting at the District Soviet House and asked anxiously, "What's this I hear, that all the women are being scrapped?"*
>
> *"What women?"*
>
> *"Well, the legal wives…"*
>
> *"Woke up… That happened last week. Those who were married before the Soviets, they're done for, finished."*
>
> *"But I've been living with my old woman for thirty years," said the stovemaker. "What am I supposed to do with her now?"*
>
> *"Whatever you want, but she's got to go," said the redheaded Mitka.*
>
> *"Dumbhead! If you have no understanding of a thing, keep quiet," said the member of the Soviet. "Nobody's chasing them; the only thing is that you've got to get the stamp applied to it properly."*
>
> *"Applied to what?"*
>
> *The other thought for a few moments, then said, "To whatever it's got to go on." -from* About Cows: Epoch of 1918

I was tickled pink to read Romanov's stories, because they confirm two of my hunches: 1) the best hook is the Peeping-Tom hook, see here. 2) Conflict between simple characters, done well, can have complex and delightful results.

Romanov's work was popular; he caught the audience's attention. In my opinion, it's worth studying his style, because if you can grab somebody's attention in the hectic hour before the workday starts, then you're a top-flight communicator.

Romanov was the son of a landowner (which put him in a persecuted political class) and was soon black-listed by the Bolshevik government. In the words of Mirra Ginsburg, who translated some of Romanov's work, this is how Romanov was snuffed out:

> *Called "an artist of the first rank" and "a worthy heir to Gogol and Goncharov," he was treated from the first with uneasy ambivalence by the official critics, who alternated between claiming him as a supporter of the Communist Revolution and criticizing him for being alien and hostile to it.* Comrade Kislyakov *(1930), which satirized the new officialdom, was bitterly attacked and withdrawn from sale soon after publication. Romanov was unable to publish anything again for several years. A few of his sketches appeared in magazines between 1936 and 1938, when he died of heart disease. His books were deleted from circulation, and his name, like Mikhail Bulgakov's and Yevgeny Zamyatin's, was deleted from history. Unlike Bulgakov, he has not been accorded even partial rehabilitation in the post-Stalin era, and remains virtually unknown in Russia today. – from* The Fatal Eggs and Other Soviet Satire

Of course, the same can be said about Romanov in the West: the only writing about him that I can find is a 1966 book by Anna Gattinger. I know this book exists; I haven't yet pinned down a copy.

LEAVE A COMMENT

AO3 LEGAL AND TECH!

The folks at AO3 were offended at my post on their services.

I guess they felt threatened by my observations; which means it's a good idea for all fan fiction writers to read my post.

If, indeed, the benevolent souls at the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) are providing a data storage service out of the goodness of their hearts, then they will make an effort explain this statement, which comes form their terms of service on the A03 website:

PARTING FROM THE OTW

1. Parting from the OTWAs noted in section e., control over individual fanworks contained within a collection always rests with their creators. This section applies to collections as a whole. If the collection's original maintainer decides that he or she no longer wants to be affiliated with the OTW, or the OTW board decides they no longer wish to work with the original maintainer, the following procedures for dissolution will apply:
   A. OTW will keep the content currently on the OTW server(s), whether in the Archive of Our Own or in a special collection.
   B. OTW will keep the subdomain (e.g., foresmutters.transformativeworks.org) and subdirectory (e.g, opendoors.transformativeworks.org/foresmutters) URLs of special projects, pointing to the content currently on the OTW servers.
   C. OTW will give the original maintainer back the original domain name if any (e.g., http://www.foresmutters.org) or the archive or special project, as well as a copy of the current contents of the project (or all stories under the archive tag in the Archive of Our Own).
   D. OTW will not be responsible for helping the maintainer set up elsewhere, only for giving him or her the content and transferring back domain ownership.
   E. OTW will place a prominent announcement on the Open Doors page indicating that the original maintainer has moved to a new location, with a link to the new location if provided by the maintainer.
   F. **OTW may choose to continue work on the collection on the OTW servers.**
   G. These ToS are written assuming a single maintainer. If there are multiple active maintainers of a collection, they must all agree before the OTW will bring the collection into Open Doors. If some but not all of the maintainers later wish to part from the OTW, those who wish to do so can continue to work with the collection on the OTW servers, while the OTW will follow provisions d. and e. for any maintainers who wish to move the collection elsewhere. The OTW will retransfer domain names only to maintainers who were registered owners of the domain names at issue. For active collections, maintainers can use whatever dispute resolution procedure they work out between themselves, provided that they otherwise comply with OTW policies.

   The goal of these rules is to be clear about how special collections and other extant fannish projects might come under the OTW umbrella while still preserving the autonomy both of the original maintainer and of the OTW. We want to provide a permanent home to projects, and preserve the results of our efforts, without the original maintainer feeling like she or he is giving up all control.

****

This legalese matters and I'm going to explain why by asking you to exercise your imagination.

What if that famous piece of *Twilight* fan fiction *Fifty Shades of Grey* COULDN'T have its history erased? What if the original fan fiction site that hosted "Snowqueens Icedragon" and her work could benefit from the exposure that E.L. James' success created? What if fifty more fan fiction writers could continue adding to E.L. James' original idea and generate even more traffic for the original hosting site…

Can reader traffic be converted into cash? Is there money to be made by being the ORIGINAL supplier of an INTERNATIONAL success? No, no, no. Those "what ifs" are the mistaken assertions of a blogger.

Let's see how Ao3 pans out, and if they are really as benevolent as they claim to be. You don't have to prove it to me, Claudia Rebaza, prove it to the fan writers.

LEAVE A COMMENT

ETHNOBOTANY

a.nolen Harvest, 2012

Around August, I forgot about my garden. By the time I realized that I had a weed problem, the garden was so overrun by volunteer corn and prairie grasses that I left it for dead.

Then came the cold snap. The grasses died, heavy rain punched down their stalks and rotted their leaves. The rain revealed a bounty of wild corn, pumpkins, acorn squash and Yellow Indian Woman beans. It's incredible that these plants made it past July, because we've had a terrible drought in the Midwest. But the pumpkins, beans and corn just kept going.

I shouldn't be surprised. These plants are The Three Sisters that have historically grown well together in the New World. Corn would support the beans; pumpkin vines (which are gorgeous, by the way) protect the shallow roots of the corn; and all three grow next to flowing water. These plants are very vigorous in my region; I don't even need to add fertilizer. (Though I did have to spray for cucumber beetles in late June.)

Pumpkins were so important for survival in early America that a Pilgrim had this to say about them:

For pottage and puddings and custards and pies
Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies,
We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon,
If it were not for pumpkins we should be undoon."

Pilgrim verse, circa 1633

You'll see carrots in the picture also. Queen Anne's Lace is actually wild carrot and was introduced to the Midwest from Europe. My carrots grew without much care either, as did my radishes, which belong to the Brassicaceae family. Some of the most abundant native herbs are also Brassicaceae, so no surprises there.

But carrots and radishes are exceptional. Many of the European transplants that I've tried like mandrake, woad, monkshood – or even French varieties of pumpkin- don't do well here at all.

The other notable exception is strawberry. I set down a patch of Mara des Bois two years ago. These beauties can compete with prairie grass and *are still fruiting now*, which is astounding. Mara des Bois was developed in France and is a cross between a few heirloom breeds. The berries have an intensely sweet taste and an ambrosial smell.

The ethnobotany of European strawberries is bittersweet: they are traditionally associated with dead children. Maybe this is an echo of children lost by the edge of the forest. In English folklore, robins cover children who die in the woods with strawberry leaves. In German tradition, the goddess Frigg would smuggle dead newborn babies into heaven by hiding them amongst strawberry plants.

The earliest evidence of Strawberry cultivation comes from Switzerland, and it's in the Bavaria/Austria/Switzerland area where strawberries are most commonly used in folk medicine. Mothers and children had to be careful when and where they ate strawberries- if they passed a cross or a chapel carrying the fruit, they must leave an offering of three berries. It was thought that elves lived on strawberry leaves and fallen strawberries belonged to the devil.

There are many, many more legends. My favorite book(s) on the subject are *Compendium of Symbolic and Ritual Plants in Europe, Volumes One and Two* by Marcel de Cleene and Marie Claire Lejeune. It's hard to find, but worth the cost and effort.

Can you see the strawberries?

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE FATAL EGGS

Take me to your hubris.

I'm reading a collection of Soviet satire from our local library, which contains Mikhail Bulgakov's famous story, *The Fatal Eggs* (1924).

It's a story about a mad scientist, a herpetologist, who works in 1920s Moscow. As his countrymen starve around him, he worries about the little creatures hopping around in the University Terrarium. Suddenly, this scientist discovers the Ray of Life, a thin spectrum of light that, when concentrated on a group of living cells, makes them morph into monstrous, supernatural versions of themselves.

As a result, the scientist is courted by the press, the government, Western spies- all of whom he treats with his customary misanthropy.

But there's one visitor who he can't deny. A certain Alfred Bronsky, a sleek man with diamonds in his eyes and something "American" about him, who writes for the biggest newspapers and is connected with the GRU (Russia's CIA). The scientist finds time for Bronsky.

Bronsky is a journalist, but his *true* calling is far more practical: he needs the scientist to use his fame and expertise to cure an epidemic. The "Chicken Plague" is ravishing Russia's countryside. This plague started at an ex-deaconess's profitable chicken business, which was sneakily masquerading as an agricultural collective. (Tsk, tsk!)

The "Chicken Plague" is a SARs-style epidemic: it ends as quickly as it starts. Bulgakov assures us that the plague was not started (or ended!) by the Commissars.

Once the "Chicken Plague" burns itself out, a new problem arises. All chickens were culled to stymie the sickness; so a new chicken breeding program must begin, not for eggs and meat, *but to save face overseas*. Bring on the scientist's Ray of Life…you already know how this ends.

There is a misdelivery and instead of chicken's eggs, a bevvy of reptile eggs gets zapped by the invigorating ray. A herd of super-mutant snakes, crocodiles and lizards terrorizes the USSR. Is the nation doomed? Of course not- as usual, the weather saves them. A cold snap kills the mutants; but not before an angry mob beats the scientist to death.

The Fatal Eggs is a wickedly funny story and provides some insight into the pre-Stalin USSR- insights that are rare in the West. For instance, the scientist lives in a seamy world: prostitutes and nude shows crowd around the theater where a government-favored director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, is accidentally crushed by a troupe of naked Boyars from one of his productions. (Bulgakov is speaking in prophetic riddles: Stalin purged Meyerhold in 1939; Meyerhold's enigmatic wife Zinaida was found dead shortly afterwards, stabbed in her apartment. Read all about Meyerhold here and here.) Bulgakov's pre-Stalin Moscow smells like Weimar Germany.

The Fatal Eggs was the beginning of the end for Bulgakov: it drew negative attention from the GRU and was considered anti-Soviet. The writer's sympathetic relationship with Stalin turned sour. I guess that Bulgakov should have put his eyes out after 1918!

Strangely, or maybe not strangely, Bulgakov's work receives little attention in the West. Maybe that's because a large swath of the American intelligentsia supported Stalin when Bulgakov wrote his satire, so when the time came to part ways Solzhenitsyn was a more flattering champion.

LEAVE A COMMENT

WINNEBAGO MAN

Do me a kindness.

> *I used to produce programming for fifty million people. My initial experience was at WBBMZ, the CBS station in Chicago. And then I went on and became a news director at various stations around the country. I was greatly taken with news and news production. I loved the concept; I loved the Ed Murrows and the Sevareids and the Bill Shadels and all of the old people who reported news. They didn't give you any opinion, that was the concept behind news. It was fair, and um, that changed.*
>
> *And I came to the point at where I concluded* I don't want this anymore*. I never wanted to see W 52nd Street again, I never wanted to see Wilshire Boulevard again, I never wanted to see Wacker Drive again, does that give you an idea?*

The words of Jack Rebney, otherwise known as 'Winnebago Man', explaining why he gave up his career and finally decided to move to a cabin on a mountain in northern California.

Can you relate to his feelings?

If you don't know who I mean by 'Winnebago Man', look here. This viral video made Jack Rebney famous; though the world didn't know that he is actually very articulate until he became the subject of a documentary (now on Netflix!) titled *Winnebago Man*.

Rebney was underwhelmed by his internet success. He felt fans of the video were morons and wanted nothing to do with internet stardom:

> *I'm going to appear on, what, YouTube? That'll be great. I can hardly wait: I'll be programmed right between the guy with the broken arm and somebody doing an exotic dance. That'll be great.*

Rebney can't understand why any thinking person would want to watch some of the trash that is posted online. Maybe it's a generational thing: I've never met anybody over 40 who appreciates *Two Girls and a Cup* or *Best Pimple Pop Ever.* Frankly, I stand with the old-timers.

Rebney was underwhelmed with the documentary crew, too. At first, they tried to do the usual film-school thing: get Rebney to admit to a troubled childhood on tape. I mean, who in their right mind would leave CBS? Rebney tries to turn the tables on the doc crew and promote his book *Jousting with the Myth*.

Predictably, Rebney's opinions make the director, Ben Steinbauer, nervous. The only explanation of Rebney's views that survives editing is this:

> *I want people to understand that there are critical elements that they have to attend to, otherwise they are going to loose their country. Dick Cheney has had eight years to literally ruin this economy. That's the issue.*

So I went to Amazon and bought *Jousting with the Myth*. The book is a well-researched and unsympathetic critique of the desert religions; he targets Christianity in particular, because he feels that it has the most relevance for America.

I agree with some of what Rebney says. He examines William F. Buckley Jr's type of Christianity and how religion can be anti-intellectual. He sees a lot of magical, adolescent thinking in society and not very much logic. Schools are being dumbed-down and the banks benefit from everything. Rebney even suggests that democracy is a sham and that the one-man-one-vote idea is untenable. (Gasp!)

Rebney sees himself as a liberal, but in fact, many conservatives would share his views; the irony of this brings up an interesting question. What is conservative and what is liberal? Rebney says that the mainstream media has a conservative bias; lots of people insist that the opposite is true. In my experience, powerful people don't think in terms of "conservative" or "liberal", except during election time.

Jack Rebney ultimately faces his internet fans at the Found Film Festival in San Fransisco and he changes his opinion of them, *apparently* because they laughed at his Cheney jokes. (I believe that the film was shot in 2008.)

If you're interested in Jack Rebney's CBS career, read this Examiner article. It's worth reading Rebney's book; the man wasn't a lightweight.

> *Jack Rebney began his broadcasting career at CBS in 1953 as a producer in both the the news and entertainment divisions.*
>
> *News and entertainment programming are often indistinguishable today, but in the 50s, they were separated by an impenetrable wall. The entertainment division made money, while news departments performed a public service, less concerned with the crass demands of commercialism.*

During his broadcast career, Jack Rebney interviewed everyone from Malcolm X and Eleanor Roosevelt to Marilyn Monroe and Jimmy Stewart.

He was one of three directors CBS deployed to the 1956 Democratic Convention in Chicago, interviewing then-Senator and vice-presidential contender John F. Kennedy.

LEAVE A COMMENT

MUSHI SHI

Mushi Shi. Yuki Urushibara, Afternoon Magazine, 1999-2008.

I'm attracted to Shinto because of its *kami* concept. *Kami* are nature spirits, similar to elves in pre-Christian Europe. They are the guardians of a place, the spiritual embodiment of natural phenomenon or manifest in living creatures. Don't disrespect your environment; you'll anger the *kami*. Maintain an orderly house; or you'll set your home's *kami* against you.

Deep down, I do believe that elves are watching us.

So, I was pleased to find the anime series, *Mushi Shi* on Netflix. Mushi are very similar to *kami* and each episode in the series is a self-contained story about mushi and what happens when they are disturbed, interact with humans, etc. These are ghost stories- some are shockingly weird and may be a little too scary for children, but there is never any gore or suggestive material. *Mushi Shi* can be unsettling, just like the old Grimm's fairy tales.

The storytelling is poetic and carefully thought-out; the English dubbing is excellent. (At least, it doesn't sound clumsy. I can't speak to how closely it follows the original Japanese dialogue.)

Mushi Shi was originally published as a manga (comic) in *Afternoon* magazine, which I understand has launched several successful anime series. The manga's creator, Yuki Urushibara, won at least three awards for her work in Japan, but it's hard to find any English-language information on her. You can read the *Mushi Shi* manga in English here. (My apologies if this link is not legal; I will remove it if somebody notifies me.)

What inspired Ms. Urushibara? From the cover of *Mushi Shi Manga Volume 1:*

> *Ever since I was little I liked old stories. I also liked bugs and science (at an elementary school level). So now I am writing these kinds of stories. There's no way I can make these as good as real legends, but I'm just happy that it was fun to make these. Yuki Urushibara.*

1 COMMENT

WHEN A MASTER FAILS

The Landlady's a serial killer AND the rabbit's stuffed.

There aren't many Roald Dahl stories I don't like; but there are a few that I find flat. *Bitch* is a good example, that story originally appeared in *Playboy*. The one I'm going to talk about today is *The Landlady* (*The New Yorker*), because I know Dahl's own opinion of it.

The Landlady is a horror/ghost story and, to my knowledge, the only one that Dahl ever wrote. Dahl said (somewhere, sadly I forget where) that ghosts were hard for him to write convincingly. Talking insects, vengeful midgets, farting giants- no problem- but ghoulies, well that was just hard.

For anybody who hasn't read *The Landlady*, the plot is that a chipper 17-year old businessman falls into the clutches of a serial-killer landlady who likes taxidermy. The story is a bit like *Misery* but more tasteful and short.

Dahl wasn't 100% happy with *The Landlady*; my thirty-year-old brain wants to say he was dissatisfied with the characters.

That would be a good place to start, because the characters aren't very sympathetic. I don't really care what happens to the tight-fisted young suck-up; I can't even take glee in his immanent stuffing. The taxidermist is just evil, flatly evil.

Bitch suffers from flat characters also, though to a lesser extent. Uncle Oswald is just a salty cad and I get no jollies from his success or failure. *Note to self: If you develop a distasteful hero, you'd better blow him up somehow; preferably have him blow himself up.* Next.

The second thing that Dahl didn't like about *The Landlady* was that the suspense didn't gel. That's a big failing for a Dahl-tale; suspense and twists are his hallmark. I knew where *The Landlady* was going quite early on, there are two hints that Roald gives us that, IMHO, we don't really need: the 17-year-old's vague memory of previous victims is drawn out too long; the taxidermy is extraneous. We already know that she's crazier than your average taxidermist well before her hobby is brought up. Having said that, the killer's dottiness and confusion about which victim she's talking to are superbly played.

So how would a.nolen improve upon this master storyteller's work? Well, to begin with, let's have the little prick try to pull one over on the crazy landlady. Make him a bond salesman, peddling junk to provincial widows. Crazy landlady can be as dotty as she'd like, but she gets his number quickly. Then all these little hints at her true nature become tasty: sugar dripping from the axe above the swindler's head! Buhahhahhaaha!

There needs to be a stronger connection between the victims. Class warfare, r.e. Cambridge Grads? Maybe, but we can do better. Let's have one boy-victim be a reporter and the other be some sort of PA to a City bigwig. Or just make 'em all bankers.

Also, Dahl should have worked with the idea that the lady was crazy because she'd lost a son in the war. It makes her sympathetic and gives him a chance to actually say something about the state of the world, which Dahl was cautious about doing, at least in his early life.

So yeah, if I'd been there, Dahl could have done a much better job with this one; though the story wouldn't have been published.

LEAVE A COMMENT

A HANDFUL OF HOOKS

Come to me, souls yearning to be free.

There are cheap ways of getting somebody's attention. Gore, foul language… you know what I'm talking about. The queasy stuff that grabs the reader without asking anything more of him than a sense of the horrible or trashy.

Try to pull away from that type of a hook and you find yourself in deep water pretty fast, at least I did. My particular experience: writing about a Filipino prostitution ring that I had glancing contact with in Saudi Arabia. I was eight, so it's not the type of contact one might expect.

I started writing about this experience, then realized that I relied on the gruesome details of Saudi street-life to draw the reader in. Not the type of writing I want to do. Time to scrap that stuff and start over.

Splash! I'm barely keeping my head above water. How do I even float? *Identify with character, not shock with morbid details.* That works to a certain extent, even pimps have some characteristics that people can sympathize with; but my story started to sound preachy.

I need to do better than float; I need to tread water at least. So let's go in a little closer to the shore I just left. *Appeal to the peeping-tom in everybody; enter with sensitive details about the character in question.*

I didn't come to this realization on my own. I was reading my *Roald Dahl Omnibus* and it hit me: Peeping-Tom hooks are Dahl's favorite type of hook.

Don't take my word for it. Read *Neck*, *Nunc Dimittis*, *The Great Automatic Grammatisator*, *William and Mary*, *Georgy Porgy*… I'm sure that there are more. Dahl especially likes to write in the 'confessional' style, and it works. Confessional-stories are ideal for the Peeping-Tom hook.

The genius of this tactic lies in the versatility of the "sensitive details"- they don't have to be gross or appeal to the prurient interest. They only have to feel sensitive to the character in question. A reader's natural desire to learn why another person is squirming will draw him in from page one.

Two prime examples, first paragraphs from:

1) *Georgy Porgy*

> *Without in any way wising to blow my own trumpet, I think that I can claim to being in most respects a moderately well-matured and rounded individual. I have traveled a good deal. I am adequately read. I speak Greek and Latin. I dabble in science. I can tolerate a mildly liberal attitude in the politics of others. I have complied a volume of notes upon the evolution of the madrigal in the fifteenth century. I have witnessed the death of a large number of persons in their beds; and in addition, I have influenced, at least I hope I have, the lives of quite a few others by the spoken word delivered from the pulpit.*
>
> *Yet, in spite of all this, I must confess that I have never in my life- well, how shall I put it?- I have never really had anything much to do with women.*

Snap! At least for me, snap!

2) *Nunc Dimittis*

> *It is nearly midnight, and I can see that if I don't make a start with writing this story now, I never shall. All evening I have been sitting here trying to force myself to begin, but the more I have thought about it, the more appalled and ashamed and distressed I have become by the whole thing.*
>
> *My idea- and I believe it was a good one- was to try, by a process of confession and analysis, to discover a reason or at a any rate some justification for my outrageous behavior toward Janet de Pelagia. I wanted, essentially, to address myself to an imaginary and sympathetic listener, a kind of mythical* you, *someone gentle and understanding to whom I might tell unashamedly every detail of this unfortunate episode. I can only hope that I am not too upset to make a go of it.*

Ha! Lay it on me.

Now to do this, you've got to know the character very well. In *Georgy Porgy*, the priest in question was stunted by the extremely liberal attitudes of his mother; but he consciously believes that she was reasonable and forward-thinking in her parenting. The reader knows the priest better than he knows himself, and the painful embarrassment he feels is slowly elaborated throughout the story. It's water-torture, but a good kinda water-torture, 'cause it's not me.

Now the slimy little toad from *Nunc Dimittis* is a narcissistic type of person who is more interested in understanding himself than the pain he caused others. We the readers see this quickly, but NPD never sees it, even up to the point where he poisons himself on caviar. Instead, he regales every gross little emotion that he feels against the lady who rebuffed him. We can cheer for her a little at each of his painful revelations; and we can take part in his glee as his plan against her unfolds. Two spoiled brats pitted against each other- a fight to the death! Again, delicious, delicious.

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E. Oop on Page Six

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